A general view of the rural economy of England 1538–1840

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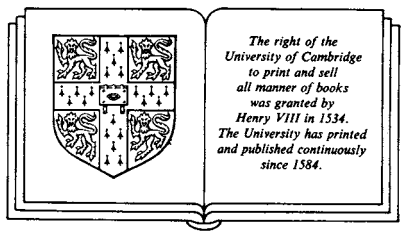

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Contents

Figures

Tables

1

A bird's eye view of the past

Wouldn't it be nice to have a bird's eye view of the past, to grasp interrelations in the early modern economy over space and time? E. L. Jones thought so, in examining the relations between industrialization and deindustrialization in the eighteenth century.[1] But the economic history of early modern England is marked by the patchiness of its sources. Time series cannot be easily constructed, for any one variable; it is hard to map variables over space.

The challenge compounds when time and space must be considered together, to see change whole, to observe the relation of parts to the whole, over time. Linked spatial and temporal coverage is important to many historiographical pursuits, such as the investigation of the diffusion and timing of technological change, or of enclosure (on both of which the study is largely mute). Spatially wide and temporally deep coverage is decisive in other areas of exploration; regional specialization and market integration are classic problems of the relation of parts to the whole, over time; so are the temporally and spatially related processes of industrialization and deindustrialization with which Jones was concerned. It makes a difference to our interpretation of any one period within the long run to know that the transformation we are examining was concentrated in that period rather than another, or in that period alone rather than extending over the whole of the long run. As the book will show, several vital early modern changes were loaded into a shorter period than is usually thought.

The General View works through its ability to see change whole. Figure 1.1 is equivalent to a snapshot taken by a high flying (and preternaturally talented) bird, with a very long time exposure; the imaginary camera's shutter would have had to have been open for the

[1] Jones, 'Constraints', p. 424.

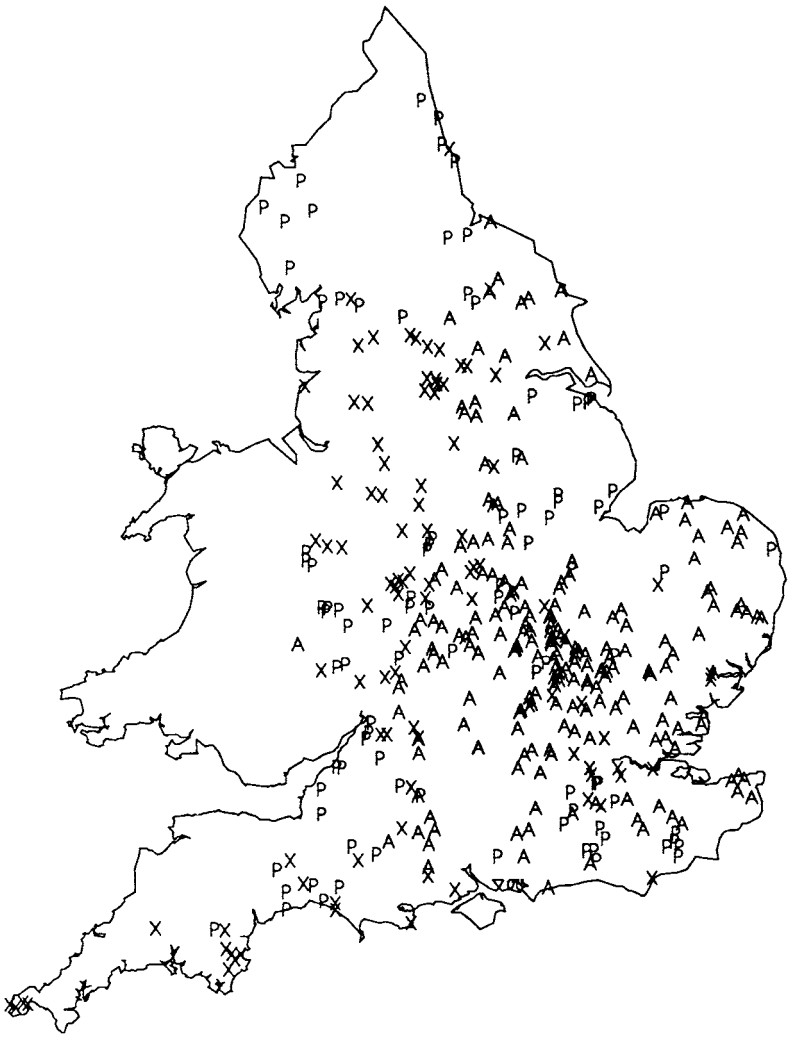

Figure 1.1 Seasonal Types, 1701–40
Key: A A-Type
P P-Type
X X-Type

first forty years of the eighteenth century. One symbol is plotted for each of the parishes of a set of 542 that (a) was not a market town and (b) recorded at least twenty-four marriages in 1701–40. Chapter 3 explains the derivation of the symbols 'P', 'A', and 'X'. I shall spend

the next two chapters demonstrating that the A's represent arable practices, the P's areas of rearing, and the X's regions of rural industry.

The map is not a bad representation of the familiar, 'traditional', regions of the rural English economic landscape; the west is pastoral and industrial, the east arable, and the Midlands a heterogeneous medley of arable, pastoral, and industrial symbols. Interestingly, as most of the book will go on to argue, the regional pattern of Figure 1.1 was a creation of the late seventeenth century, replacing a far more homogeneous blanket of arable activities (see the companion map for 1561–1600, Figure 1.4, below), and was the product of regional specialization in the use of land and labour.

There is evidence here of a sharp early modern discontinuity in the English rural economy. But who would have thought that the evidence would be derived from the seasonality of marriage, the foundation of Figure 1.1? The book exploits a source that is not essentially patchy, and that contains an unparalleled length of runs and breadth of coverage, through and across early modern England. The record is, however, improbable as a source for economic history, fraught with its own difficulties, not least the one of commending its acceptance. The study is based on parish registers of marriages, used not for the occasional runs of occupations they may contain, but for the pure, quantitative, seasonality of marriage, the seasonal pattern of weddings within the year.

Lambs and calves were dropped, crops ripened for harvest, in their own seasons, different seasons. Agricultural work was seasonal, governed by the annual rhythm of growth, and marriages moulded themselves to the seasonal matrix of work. Weddings, like other celebrations, were infrequent during the months of maximum work and risk; they then clustered in the weeks immediately following the relief from work and risk. Why they clustered is probably overspecified: high harvest wages were paid to labourers; unmarried servants in husbandry were released from their annual contracts; one could posit a need to celebrate the end of a year's work; there certainly would have been a pent-up demand for weddings, strengthened by the revelation of prenuptial conceptions.[2]

There were two great agricultural seasons, the late summer, early autumn harvest, which was followed by autumn weddings, and the late winter, early spring lambing and calving of traditional animal

[2] See the discussion in Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History of England*, Chapter 8. Other influences on the timing of marriage, 'disturbances' from the instrumental point of view of this project, are discussed in this author's 'Time and Space', pp. 755–79, and below in Chapter 2.

husbandry, followed by spring and early summer weddings.[3] From this unlikely source, marriage registers, can be constructed measures of grossly arable (autumn-marrying) work, grossly pastoral (spring/summer-marrying) work, and grossly non-agricultural, rural industrial work, showing little tendency towards peaks in marriages in either of the agriculturally determined seasons.

One result of that construction was displayed in Figure 1.1; the A-Types were parishes where autumn was the main marriage season, the P-Types parishes where spring/early summer marriages (after lambing and calving) predominated, and the X-Types parishes where marriages were crowded into neither the autumn nor the spring/early summer, and which were, in the main, rural industrial places (although the next two chapters will suggest other possible meanings of non-seasonality, especially in the parishes of the northwest). The timing of weddings accommodated itself to other claims on the time of grooms and brides and other residents of the parish, work being foremost among these other claims, so the seasonality of marriage can be made into a proxy for the local pattern of work.

Why bother with so indirect a measure? If one works at a high enough level of spatial aggregation, abstraction, and inference, as in the eighteenth-century studies of Crafts, Ippolito, and Jackson, regional variations will be unimportant, and need not be measured.[4] Or one can assume away variability of change over time, and act as if the economy moved seamlessly from some late medieval state to some modern one, ever more commercial, ever more specialized. A variation on the theme of seamless progress is to appropriate all the change to the sub-period being studied (see below, Chapter 4). But if time and space are to be considered jointly, more precision is needed.

Many indicators of economic activities are more direct than are marriage seasons. Occupational designations irregularly appear in registers of baptisms, burials, and marriages, in the unusual tax record, in other occasional listings, but always erratically. There was no national directive to make census-like records of local inhabitants before the nineteenth century (and even then, as Rickman noted in his commentary on the 1821 census, local clerical pedants had balked at including shepherds and graziers in the category 'employed in agri-

[3] That pastoral weddings seem closely tied to the timing of the weaning of young beasts, rather than hay-making, for instance, argues for risk aversion as the influence on the timing of these weddings, in this case aversion to the risk of losing capital on the hoof. See discussion in Chapter 2.

[4] Crafts, 'Income Elasticity', pp. 153–68; Ippolito, 'Effect of the "Agricultural Depression"', pp. 298–312; Jackson, 'Growth and Deceleration', pp. 333–51.

culture', since they did not till the fields).[5] To find a number of people recorded as 'husbandmen', or 'yeomen', or later as 'farmers', tells us nothing of the cereal and animal crops they produced, although a crude breakdown between employment in agriculture and employment in crafts and trades may be possible. Even then, as Swain noted relative to cloth-working in northeastern Lancashire, many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century weavers hid from historians behind the title 'yeoman'.[6]

Identification of occupations in fiscal and other records is far from uniform over time and space. It is so much more common in the context of the varied occupations of the industrial north in the eighteenth century, for example, than in the records of the more blandly agricultural south, that one gets the impression that the record-keeper's (often the vicar's) curiosity had first to be piqued before he felt moved to record the occupation, as, in another context, one can be led to believe that most of the inhabitants of Over Areley, Worcestershire (now Staffordshire) died by hanging themselves, since that appears such a common cause of death noted in the burial register, compared to the seldom noted, presumably more tediously expected more frequent causes of death.[7] In so many otherwise promising occupational listings, a large number of people are given no occupation, leaving us with the problem of choosing one of three assumptions: (1) the record-keeper sometimes forgot, randomly, to record the occupation (so we can make inferences on the pattern of occupations based on the numbers whose work was indeed recorded), or (2) the occupation, like the other causes of death in Over Areley, was too usual to be worth noting, invalidating inferences based on the proportions recorded in the (interesting-to-the-recorder) occupations, or (3) residents in some occupations were better known to the vicar, and others less well known, again invalidating inferences based on the proportions recorded in the (known-to-the-recorder) occupations. Philip Styles felt he could estimate the occupations of 40 per cent of the adult male population of Fenny Compton, Warwickshire, from returns to the Marriage Duty Act (6 & 7 Wm. and Mary, c. 6): thirty-four were gentlemen, yeomen, husbandmen, farmers, or labourers, and nineteen were occupied in trade or crafts. But what were the other 60 per cent of the adult males doing, and what allows us to feel safe in assuming their occupations to have been distributed as were those of the registered?[8] Changes in record-keepers led to

[5] Rickman, 'Preliminary Observations', p. vii.
[6] Swain, 'Industry', p. ii.
[7] Mayo, ed., *Registers of Over Areley*.
[8] Styles, *Studies*, pp. 90–107.

changes in occupational titles, too; all the 'farmers' may appear to disappear from a parish simply because a new record-maker may have not thought an occupation as obvious as farming worth his recording.

Some candidates for sources are limited in their chronological span to a single year (such as the cross-sectional glimpse afforded by the 1801 crop returns, or by Schedule B of the 1798 income tax), or to somewhat longer periods, such as the eighteenth-century's militia lists and the settlement examinations, which abound for the eighteenth as they do not for the seventeenth or nineteenth centuries.[9] And each of these sources is also subject to problems of truncation and representativeness parallel to those mentioned above in connection with occupational listings. The crop returns, for example, asked no questions about livestock.

First hand accounts can be mined, although the biases of the observers must be taken into account. Thirsk noted the surprise expressed by continental visitors such as Friedrich, Duke of Württemberg, at the extent of English woodland, pasture, and livestock; Ashton reminded us of Defoe's eye for the striking rather than the commonplace.[10] There was no systematic attempt at national surveys until Arthur Young took his tours and the Board of Agriculture made its late eighteenth and early nineteenth century surveys, the two sets of *General Views* of each county.

A seeming patchwork of local and regional studies, patiently compiled from whatever material pertains to the place, can be gathered, but variations in sources and methods limit the stitching of the studies into one quilt. This obtains even when the principal sources are similar, and individual arguments persuasive, as in the use of probate inventories of the moveable property of dead farmers, labourers, and rural craftsmen. By no means was the moveable property of all in the locality recorded by probate. Hoskins came close to suggesting that it was lack of ambition that kept most labourers in Wigston Magna cowless, and thus lacking wills and inventories as well; Margaret Spufford wrote of the cottages the contents of which were often below the notice of the probate procedure.[11] And differences in method, between for instance Overton, Yelling, and Skipp, and in the questions asked of the inventories, complicate a clear linked perception of relations between agricultural changes in Norfolk and Suffolk, east

[9] Turner, 'Arable in England and Wales', pp. 291–302; Grigg, 'Changing Agricultural Geography', pp. 73–96; Overton, '1801 Crop Returns', pp. 55–67.

[10] Thirsk, 'Introduction' (1967c), pp. xxx–xxxi; Ashton, cited in Chambers and Mingay, *Agricultural Revolution*, p. 33.

[11] Hoskins, *Midland Peasant*, p. 200; Spufford, *The Great Reclothing*, p. 3.

Worcestershire, and northwest Warwickshire.[12] There was no set form for the recording of goods, as those who have used inventories have been at pains to tell us.[13] They become consistent, comparable, homogeneous records only to the extent that order is imposed on them. There is, in that sense, a seeming embarrassment of national riches, too great to be tackled by a single order-imposing researcher, so the store has been minced into manageable sets of inventories and other records, each subject to its own rules of consistency. Thirsk noted a difficulty in drafting the new national map of farming types in the fifth volume of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, because the authors of the regional maps that were to be pieced together did not always agree on their identification of farming types along the common borders of their regions, where no difference in farming type might have been expected.[14]

A pile of Anglican marriage registers may seem a strange perch from which to survey change over time and space in the economy, but at least the information drawn from the registers seems to work, in suggesting dominant economic patterns. Consider Cowfold and Barley, two of the parishes of Figure 1.1. Figure 1.2 plots the strength of the tendency for the parishes' weddings to occur in the autumn (measured on the horizontal axis), against their tendency to occur in the spring and early summer (Chapter 3 explains the derivation of the two indices). The points are labelled at the mid years of the contiguous forty-year periods, and Figure 1.1's observations are italicized. The muddied combinations of autumn and spring indices for the Interregnum (here, the points labelled '1640'), where Cowfold and Barley almost meet, are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Barley married after the grain harvest, in the autumn, and it plotted as an 'A' on Figure 1.1. Cowfold, following a weak autumnal start, married after calving and lambing, in the spring and early summer, and appears in Figure 1.1 as a 'P'.

Industrial work was less seasonal than work in agriculture, and had a lesser impact on the timing of marriages within the year, so tendencies to marry after neither of the busy agricultural seasons of autumn and spring/early summer can be used to root out rural industry. Figure 1.3 shows the movement of the autumn and spring indices of marriages for Sedgley, Staffordshire, a nail-making parish in the Black Country. A fence enclosing predominantly non-agricultural

[12] Overton, 'Agricultural Change'; Overton, 'Estimating Crop Yields', pp. 363–78; Yelling, 'Probate Inventories', pp. 111–26; Skipp, *Crisis and Development*.
[13] Thirsk, 'Content', p. 71; Yelling, 'Probate Inventories', p. 111.
[14] Thirsk, 'Introduction', p. xxi.

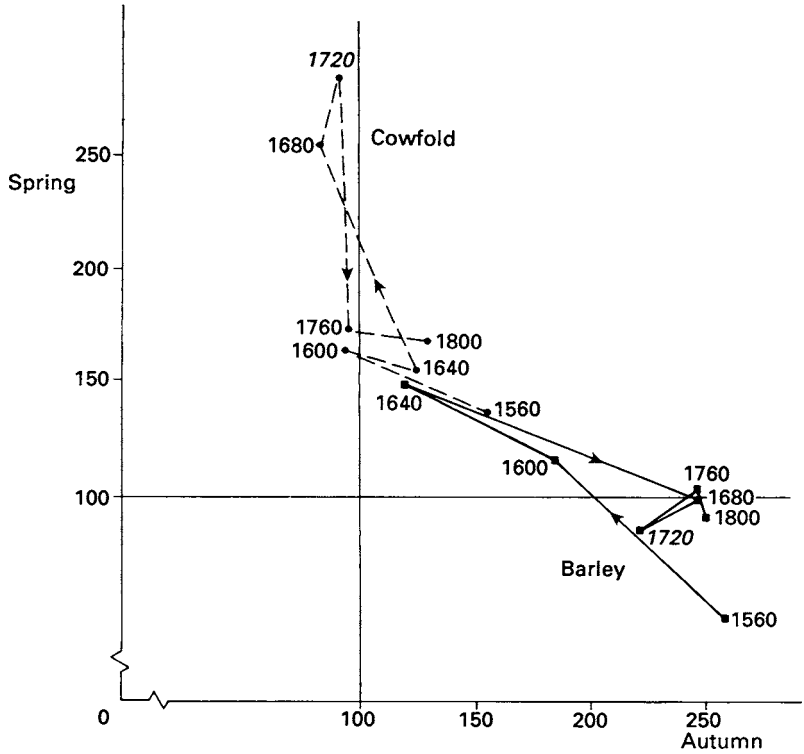

Figure 1.2 Autumn and spring/summer marriages in Cowfold (Sussex) and Barley (Herts.)

seasonal combinations of autumn and spring marriages, has been added to the figure; the fence is used in Chapter 3 to identify the non-seasonal X-Types of Figure 1.1. Sedgley enters the industrial enclosure between 1581–1620 and 1601–40; it was marked with an 'X' on Figure 1.1 (again, the observation corresponding to that map is italized).

Sedgley's rural industry hardly needs to be discovered via the seasonality of marriage, but the strong movement away from harvest-determined autumn marriages is clearly etched on the graph.[15] Asterisks indicate periods of overlap with a more conventional industry-finder, the occupational data given in Sedgly's baptism and burial registers.[16] Occupations were densely noted from 1578 to 1625, but then the vicar, Richard Browne, who had been recording the

[15] Rowlands, *Masters and Men*. [16] Thomas, *Sedgley*.

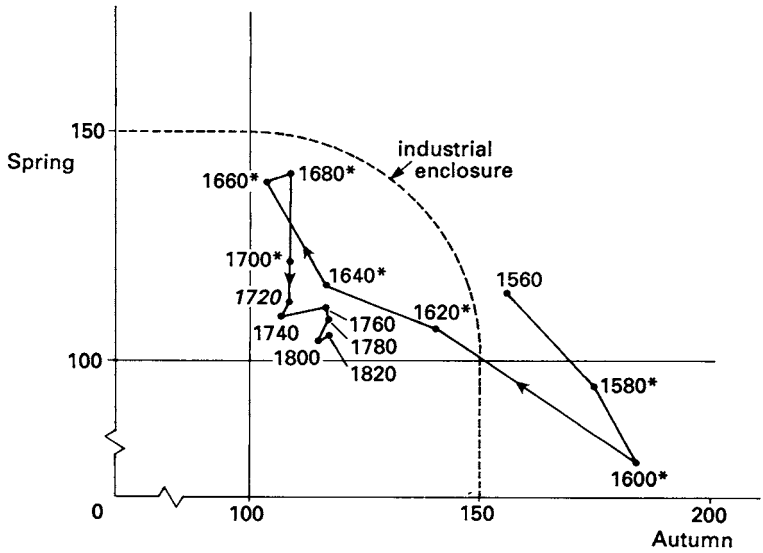

Figure 1.3 Autumn and spring/summer marriages in Sedgley (Staffs.)

occupations, died. After fifty years, occupations were once again included, from 1675 to 1685. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Sedgley already baptized more children of metal-workers (nailers, locksmiths or 'lockers', 'hambermen', 'bloomers', blacksmiths, and scythesmiths) than those whose fathers were given agricultural occupations, including labourers, gentlemen and their servants, and gardeners (see Table 1.1).

By the last period of the table, 1675–85, metal-workers were overwhelmingly more numerous. Agriculture was not only swamped in relative terms; it was dying out. Absolutely fewer baptisms and burials per annum in the agricultural sector were recorded in that last period. The dynamic of change is nicely caught in the disproportionately large number of burials of husbandmen, yeomen, labourers, etc., compared to the burials of the new, rising, and temporarily younger and healthier metal-workers. More farmers and labourers were buried in 1675–85 than children of farmers and labourers were baptized. The ratio of burials to baptisms in the agricultural sector was 1.33, while there were sixty-six baptisms and forty-nine burials in the metal-working sector (for a ratio of 0.74). Even in as well-documented a parish as Sedgley, the indirect evidence of marriage seasonality helps to fill in a gap in other records, in this case the run of occupations, by

Table 1.1. *Sedgley, Staffordshire: occupations from parish registers*[a]
Numbers per annum, baptisms and burials
(percentages in parentheses)

Father's occupation/ own occupation	Baptisms			Burials		
	1578–1600	1601–25	1675–85	1578–1600	1601–25	1675–85
agriculture	10.1	12.7	5.9	2.0	2.7	1.4
	(40)	(36)	(9)	(55)	(54)	(12)
metal-working	11.8	17.3	43.4	0.9	1.4	5.8
	(47)	(49)	(66)	(24)	(28)	(49)
mining	1.3	2.1	13.2	0.2	0.5	3.4
	(5)	(6)	(20)	(5)	(10)	(29)
other	2.0	3.2	3.3	5.7	0.4	1.2
	(8)	(9)	(5)	(16)	(8)	(10)
%	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)
N in period	578	885	724	82	124	130

[a] H. R. Thomas, ed., *Sedgley, 1558–1685*, Staffordshire Parish Registers Society, 1940–1.

pointing more precisely to when change occurred, and how discontinuously, rather than leaving the answer 'at some time, at some rate, between the 1620s and the 1670s'.

The occupational registers, and the marriage seasons, can show what the probate inventories left by two groups (in this case, metal-workers and farmers) of very different wealth cannot. In 1675–85, the moveable property left by thirteen dead farmers of Sedgley was subject to the probate procedure (81 per cent of the sixteen burials of those employed in agriculture, according to the coincident burial registers), but the seven inventories pertaining to the property of dead metal-workers represent only 11 per cent of the sixty-four metal-workers buried in Sedgley in the same period.[17] Counting protoindustrialists from the number of their inventories appears, from this single test, to be equivalent to sampling from among the cow-keeping nailers and locksmiths (cows being so much more valuable than metal-working capital). Further, using inventories to study the nature of rural industry risks exaggerating the extent of dual employment, since the nailers, etc., whose inventories will be found will be the dual employed, while the great majority (in this case) not dual employed will be lost.

[17] Roper, *Sedgley Probate Inventories*.

More English marriage registers survive for more parishes over a longer period than does any more direct economic indicator. Months of marriages are simple to collect (although it would be churlish not to begin my thanks here to the Cambridge Group for the data from the majority of the parishes in my sample). The inferences that will be drawn from the seasonality of marriage will perforce be indirect, and faults can be found in the representativeness of the registers, but they hold up well against other early modern sources in cases where cross-sectional or cross-temporal comparisons are essential. They reflect the work and risks of the many, the marrying, rather than the property of the fewer. They reflect the principal employment of those marrying in the parish, without the distraction (sadly without it, in some instances) of unusual local specialties or the bold experiments of visionary farmers.

That the seasonality of marriage reflects the seasonality of work and risks would be of minor interest, if all that was shown was that Barleys married in the autumn, Cowfolds in the spring, and nail-making Sedgleys in neither of these seasons, or that the widely known pattern of regional specializations of the eighteenth century will reveal itself in the seasons of weddings.[18] England may have married according to Figure 1.1's pattern in 1701–40, but it had not 140 years earlier (Figure 1.4). The basis of the new map is the same as that of Figure 1.1, but the data is drawn from registers 140 years older. Again, twenty-four marriages had to have been recorded in the forty years of the period for the Seasonal Type to be calculated and the parish plotted.

A process of regional specialization in marriage seasonality intervened between the two mapped periods, parallel to a process of regional specialization and change in England's rural economy. In Figure 1.4, the autumn-marrying arable symbol 'A' is predominant, as it would not be by 1701–40 (Figure 1.1). Much of the northwest is once again covered with the X's of non-autumnal, non-vernal marriages; X's are dense in the Weald, as they were not in Figure 1.1; East Anglia appears more spring-marrying, pastoral, than it would be in 1701–40. Contrast the Midlands and the West Country on the two maps: the combinations of X's and P's in the west, and all three symbols in the Midlands, has only emerged in the second period. 'God [may have] made Leicestershire for grass', as a recent fox-hunting observer had it, but the map for 1561–1600 is covered with the 'A' of arable farming.[19]

[18] Local historians might find interest in the Appendix, where the 542 parishes are listed, by county and status as market towns, along with their Seasonal Types of 'P', 'A', or 'X' in 1561–1640, 1661–1740, and 1741–1820.

[19] *Observer*, 9 December 1984.

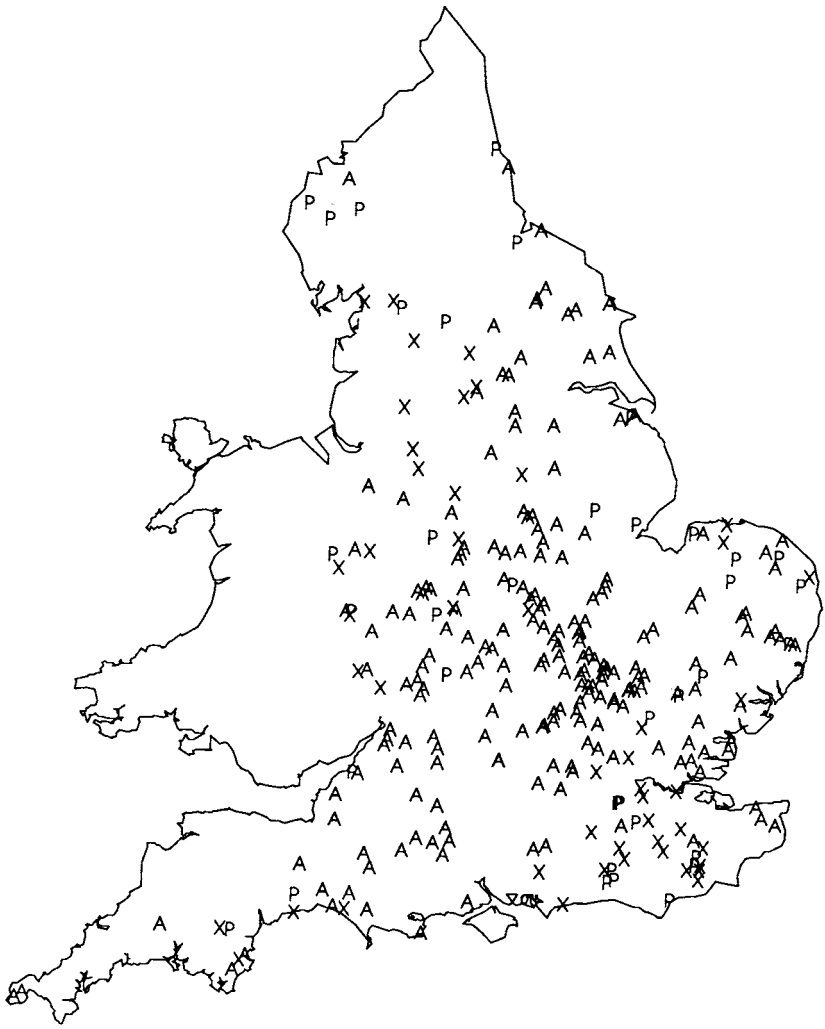

Figure 1.4 Seasonal Types, 1561–1600
Key: A A-Type
P P-Type
X X-Type

The study was feasible, in the first instance, because the data 'were there' (in the form of a machine-readable set of 404 parishes from the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure), and secondly, because in the last stages of my earlier work on farm

servants I had uncovered a curious, tantalizing, and entirely unanticipated regional divergence in marriage seasonality at an intriguing time relative to England's economic development, the later seventeenth century.[20] I had not anticipated finding the cycle in October marriages in the east, but, when I did, I then anticipated finding a parallel cycle in spring marriages in the pastoral west, and did not. The east and west both married in the autumn in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as Figure 1.4 demonstrates. So, if autumn marriages signified arable farming in the sixteenth as they did in the eighteenth century, indices could be developed from the marriage seasons to plot interrelated variations in the economy over time.

And the method works; it yields a spatially and temporally specific, if clouded, mirror of changes in early modern economic activity. Most of the substantive interpretation of these changes will be reserved for Chapters 4 to 7. Two of these chapters (4 and 5) will concentrate on agriculture, investigating the east-west bifurcation of marriage seasons and pinning down the timing of change within the 140 years that separate Figures 1.1 and 1.4, considering productivity increase and enclosure along the way. Chapter 6 will turn to rural industry, treating industrialization and deindustrialization as linked processes, and Chapter 7 will begin to sew the agricultural and industrial sectors together again, looking at the agricultural sources of new industrial parishes and the demographic implications of the spatial rearrangement of economic activity.

But I can not expect everyone to have been wholly convinced that so weird a method for studying the rural economy should work. Chapter 3 explains the source (Anglican parish registers) and the method of manipulating the dates of weddings to yield indicators of arable, pastoral, and industrial employment. The next chapter is dedicated to placing the connection between the seasonality of work and risks and the seasonality of marriage on a firmer foundation; it will also concede that there are faults with the method, finding some solace in its easier application to the English than to the continental European rural economy.

[20] Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, Chapter 6.